

Wounds and the artist: Ted Hughes and Greek drama

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In an interview in 1996 Ted Hughes claimed that 'every work of art stems from a wound in the soul of the artist'. Art, for him, is an important expression of the healing process, both mental and physical. Hughes' reputation as a poet was primarily as a poet of nature, which he saw as a way of connecting together all his deepest feelings. Yet towards the end of his life (he died in 1998) his major work was in translating and adapting Greek and Roman classical literature. He contributed poems to the collection *After Ovid* (edited by Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, 1994) and then created *Tales from Ovid* (1997). This was based on the *Metamorphoses* and was vibrantly staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Little is known about precisely how Hughes worked from the original texts. He knew some Latin but almost certainly also used other English translations for this and for his translations from other modern European languages. His translation of Racine's *Phèdre* was staged in 1998 and it was Greek drama which inspired the major achievements of his last years. His versions of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Alcestis* were published posthumously in 1999 and both were subsequently performed in the theatre. Both raise intriguing questions about their relationship to his previous work and to his experience of suffering in his own life.

Hughes had worked on classical drama previously. His adaptation of Seneca's *Oedipus* was staged at the Old Vic in 1968 and he is on record as saying that he preferred Seneca's play to that by Sophocles because Seneca's language brought out the violent and the primeval in the myth rather than 'civilising' the interpretation. Traces of this approach remain in his response to the *Oresteia* and to *Alcestis* but in both these works there is also a much more subtle relationship between his poetic style and his dual preoccupation with violence and spiritual resolution. Hughes worked first on *Alcestis*, which was nearly completed when he broke off to work on the *Oresteia*. He returned to the Euripides a few months before his death.

Alcestis

Alcestis dramatises the story of Admetos, ruler of Thessaly, who escapes death because his wife, Alcestis, is willing to die in his place. Only after her death does he fully realise what he has lost and, through the intervention of the heroic figure Heracles, is enabled to regain her. Critics have seized on the affinities between the story and Hughes' own life – his wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, committed suicide in 1963 and his next partner also killed herself. Links have been drawn between some of the language and emotions in the play and Plath's poems. However, the main medium through which Hughes directly confronted his relationship with Plath seems to have been the collection of poems published as *Birthday Letters* (1998). What is far more interesting about Hughes' version of *Alcestis* is the adaptations he made from Euripides' treatment of the story and the ways in which these in turn were developed when the play was staged.

In Euripides' play Admetos is flawed. He is so reluctant to die that he accepts Apollo's promise that death can be avoided if he finds someone to die in his place. Hughes shifts the emphasis by having Apollo find Admetos' substitute (indeed Alcestis could be said to volunteer). Hughes also presents Admetos as faithful to his wife's memory. This capacity of humans to be staunch in

the face of death is further probed in the expansion of the middle section of Euripides' play in which Hughes makes Heracles, *en route* to further Labours, unwittingly shatter the mourning seclusion of Admetos' house with a drunken burlesque re-enactment of his previous triumphs. This play then rises to a higher plane with a new section dramatising Heracles' encounter with Prometheus. Prometheus has been bound to a crag and tortured at Zeus' behest because he has questioned authority and brought enlightenment to human beings. He is liberated only by the intervention of Heracles.

This shift away from the frailty of humans and towards a probing of divine injustice was at the centre of the production of Hughes' version by Northern Broadsides (2000, directed by Barrie Rutter and designed by Adrian Rees). When Euripides' play was first staged in 438 B.C. it was as the fourth play in a sequence. It was neither a satyr play nor a conventional tragedy. The transition between the tragic events and register of the first half and the effects of the rumbustious Heracles episode in the second presents considerable challenges in tone, mood and physical movement for the actors and director in any modern production. The Hughes/Rutter staging intensified this disjunction by enlarging and dramatising the Heracles episode instead of having the events recounted by a Messenger. This also meant that overall the performance oscillated rather tantalisingly between the static, the burlesque and the emotionally probing. At the beginning of the play the entry of Death, signalled by a crash of percussion was stunning, the effect intensified visually by his white cloak which was layered and textured to represent wings, fringed with blood-red tips. However, the initial Chorus, in which all three actors stood in a row, brought the rhythm of the performance almost to a halt (the Chorus members were dressed in bright blue bonnets, which prompted one critic to refer to them as the Tellytubbies). More convincingly, Alcestis' 'death' scene, framed by silent motionless members of the household, created the impression of a painting or film-still. Later, the narrative section, in which the servants tell Heracles of Alcestis' death, and brought some control to the almost manic energy of the burlesque and modified the register. The changes of mood, pace and register were sometimes jerky but the overall effect was to show how Euripides' creation of a play from conventions 'within and around' tragedy offers an almost kaleidoscopic opportunity for the modern director and designer, as well as allowing the poet/dramatist to explore the roller-coaster of pain, suffering and healing.

Oresteia

In Hughes' *Oresteia* the conception and design of the staging was probably the crucial factor in giving the poet's engagement with the wounds of suffering a wider social application. His version was commissioned by the Royal National Theatre, directed by Katie Mitchell, designed by Vicki Mortimer and staged in the traverse space of the Cottesloe Theatre in London in 1999/2000. Hughes himself had described the text as 'the best thing I have ever done'. In the staged version there were, in effect, two different kinds of translation taking place. The first was Hughes' translation of Aeschylus. The second was the translation to the stage.

Hughes' translation of Aeschylus was spare. The diction was direct and almost totally lacking in specific colloquial or contemporary allusion. However, in contrast to the stage setting of *Alcestis* which was undefined in time and place, the staging for the *Oresteia* was much more specific, grafting on some resonant twentieth-century contexts. The Chorus of Elders were retired servicemen in wheelchairs, wore poppies and after the death of Agamemnon donned red berets, like members of the Parachute Regiment. The large sliding doors to Agamemnon's palace were used as a screen to project film of end-of-war celebrations. As the Chorus lamented the sacrifice of Iphigenia to obtain a fair wind for Troy, she appeared, gagged, and watched the action from a gallery with her image projected onto the screen. Agamemnon returned as a somewhat uneasy hero from the Trojan War, dressed as a guerrilla fighter. The background music and snatches of Eastern European chant added to the Balkan resonances. The 'carpet' on which Clytemnestra persuaded Agamemnon to walk into the palace was made up from the red dresses of small children. The programme included photographs, pock-marked with bullet holes, showing children's clothes, shoes and toys, half-buried in sand and labelled like exhibits in a criminal investigation. In this way the programme and the visual aspects of the production made the link between the wounds suffered by the modern world and the text of the play.

Hughes' translation had used the images associated with blood in a narrower way to underscore Clytemnestra's frightening description of her actions in killing Agamemnon. As the tapestries are laid out for Agamemnon to enter the house the metaphors for slaughter are already in place:

*Flush our fabrics with all the colours of blood -
Bring scarlet of the lungs,
The liver's deep indigo,
The artery's hot crimson.*

When she recounts the murder of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra's words mirror a rape scene:

*Then at my leisure, choosing the best places
On his helpless body
I pushed the blade into him...
His body arched like a bow being strung,
Every muscle straining for life.*

Hughes' response to the first play in Aeschylus' trilogy created a theatre of cruelty, spelled out in the reference to pity as 'like a butterfly in a fist/As the knuckles whiten'. This and the production's emphasis on the modern correspondences combined to make more urgent the eventual resolution in the Eumenides of the cycle of killing, revenge and further killing. Both these productions raise in acute form questions concerning the role of the director and designer. In contrast to the relationship between the text and production of *Alcestis*, the *Oresteia* on Hughes' page and the play on Mitchell's stage are two significantly different works. The ways in which Hughes' versions rework the ancient plays which inspired them also give significant insights into his conception of the craft and vision of the poet in the last stages of his life. To pursue those issues and arrive at a fuller understanding of his work as a whole it is crucial to return to the plays of Euripides and Aeschylus and to discover how Hughes reworked them.

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<http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/>

For Ted Hughes on the web see

<http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/THHome.htm>
<http://www.uni-leipzig.de/~engl/hughes/links.htm>
<http://www.mytholmroyd.net/tedhughes/alcestis.html>
<http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/classics/0,6121,98919,00.html>

An extract from Ted Hughes' *Oresteia*. Part of the speech of Clytemnestra:

*You heard me pronounce the words required by
the moment.
The moment has passed. Those words are meaningless.
How else could I have killed this man -
My deadliest enemy?
Lies and embraces were simply my method.
The knots in the net enmeshed him.
I pondered this for a long time.
And when the moment for action came
I made no mistake. See, my work
Perfected. I don't disown it.
Every possibility of error
I wrapped in a grat net -
Not a fish could have slipped from the shoal
His struggles merely tightened the tangle.
Then, at my leisure, choosing the best places
On his helpless body
I pushed the blade into him. Once, twice.
Twice he screamed. You heard him.
Then his eyes stared elsewhere.
His body arched like a bow being strung,
Every muscle straining for life.
I placed the point for a third and final time
And drove the blade clean through him.*

Part of the Watchman's speech from Hughes' *Oresteia*
*Queen Clytemnestra - who wears
A man's heart in a woman's body,
A man's dreadful will in the scabbard of her body
Like a polished blade. A hidden blade.
Clytemnestra reigns over fear.*